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RESEARCH PAPER

# The Shift of Self and Other in Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing

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**ABSTRACT**

The topic of identity has been the subject of intense and passionate discussions, with politicians, critics and revolutionaries equally tending to divide the world into opposing groups. In the post-colonial era, this has led to an emphasis on dichotomies such as oppressor-oppressed, colonizer-colonized, master-slave, settler-native, and us-them. Each country seeks to establish its uniqueness by contrasting itself with others, and in doing so, identity is often viewed as something fixed, basic, and unchanging. However, this approach has led to the creation of binary divisions in society and losing of distinctiveness and individuality due to mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity, and the need to deconstruct and reconstruct subjectivity in what is known as the third space. The relationship between human experience and societal factors in a colonial or postcolonial context is a central theme in postcolonial literature, and it explores issues such as the fluidity of power and position. This paper examines the shift of self and other in postcolonialism through an analysis of Doris Lessing's 20th century South African novel, The Grass is Singing. The novel challenges established dichotomies and demonstrates how the colonized can subvert their subordination. It also reveals the fluidity, vulnerability, and fragile nature of colonial identity by highlighting the shifting positions of those in power and those who are not.

**KEYWORDS** Identity, Other, Self, Shift and Colonial

## Introduction

Since the beginning of colonialism in the 16th century, the West has asserted its superiority over the East, with Europe being the centre of the West and the rest of the world being characterized as the East. The Europeans were seen as refined, modern, non-violent, skilled, sophisticated, sympathetic, intelligent, and fair, while the non-Europeans were viewed as uncivilized, uncultured, violent, lustful, biased, dirty, ignorant, and weak. The Europeans believed it was their duty to educate the supposedly inferior non-Europeans to live more modestly. To justify their invasion, the Europeans created a narrative that portrayed non-European cultures and groups as flawed and mediocre, giving them full control to enslave and dominate the powerless and defenceless locals. These allegations are baseless, as Frantz Fanon states that "the black soul is a white man's artefact" (16) (Fanon, 2008).The colonizers had constructed a distorted life with the help of literature, history, philosophy, politics, and other means, in which the locals were depicted as a homogeneous, savage, lustful, biased, disease-ridden, and ignorant mass with no sense of civilization or rationality This process is called Orientalism by Edward Said and it divides the world into binaries like educated-ignorant, civilized-uncivilized, liberal-prejudiced, centre-margin, orient-occident, self-other, and so on. The coloniser sees themselves as the centre of the universe, while the natives are seen as a small, inferior group doomed to subjugation and tyranny. To highlight their diversity and unique cultural identities, they provide certain traits and qualities to various classes.

In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she argues that the subaltern, or the oppressed, cannot express themselves. However, Homi Bhabha disagrees and believes that even though the subaltern cannot directly challenge their oppression, they can still use tools given to them by the colonizers to resist. Through a process of mimicry, the subaltern can adopt the master's culture, traditions, and language, creating a hybrid identity that disrupts the colonizer's claim to superiority. This hybridization process creates a liminal or in-between space, which Bhabha calls the "Third Space of Enunciation" (37) (Bhabha, 2012). This space is where new subjectivities are formed, and where the power dynamics between the colonized and the colonizer may shift. However, this process can also lead to anxiety and unpredictability, as it involves a clash of ideals and the transformation of previous subjectivities.

**Literature Review**

Numerous studies have been conducted on Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing*, each offering a unique perspective on the book. This particular research examines the novel through the lens of Homi Bhaba's concepts of colonial stereotypes, ambivalence, and shifts. However, "White Postcolonial Guilt in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*" by Joy Wang focuses specifically on the themes of historical guilt, agency, and transformation in the novel (Wang, 2009). Wang argues that the distorted interracial relationship between the white protagonist, Mary Turner, and her black servant, Moses, provides a means for white postcolonial guilt to be cathartically and redemptively resolved. The violence within the narrative is contextualized within South Africa's history of Black Peril and apartheid, with Mary's sense of guilt aligning with Judith Butler's theory of subject formation. Despite Mary's guilt being a debilitating form of sadness, it reinforces powerful forms of agency. Mary's dementia is interpreted as a metaphor for apartheid as a collective insanity, providing the basis for a broader critique of the limitations and exclusions of white postcolonial guilt.

Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya and Pedram Lalbakhsh's essay "A Socialist Feminist Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*" explores how the capitalist patriarchal system shapes women's identity and behaviour in the novel (Yahya & Lalbakhsh, 2010). By examining the societal problems and oppression women face under patriarchal domination, the essay aims to raise awareness of the need for change. This change is seen as a definitive point for communist women's activists and others who support women's rights. The outcome of this consciousness-raising is the recognition of shared problems and the possibility of planning and implementing solutions.

The paper "Cultural and Psychological Border Crossings in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*" by Elena Anca Georgescu, Angela Stanescu, and Gabriela Popa aims to demonstrate that in Doris Lessing's African writings, she operates both within and outside of the colonial experience (Georgescu et al., 2011). Lessing understands the strict limitations of colonial society, which relies on maintaining narrow boundaries to sustain its identity and unity. Despite this, she creatively pushes beyond these limits, enabling her to perceive beyond the incorrect colonial myth of white supremacy and the notion that whites and blacks should never mix. This study seeks to highlight Lessing's persistent transgression of all boundaries and to examine the social, racial, and sexual obstacles that Mary Turner faces in the novel.

In "(Im)Purity, Danger and the Body in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*," Bridget Grogan applies psychoanalytic theory to examine how the body is portrayed in Lessing's novel. The paper uses Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection to analyse the complex feelings of attraction and repulsion that define Mary Turner's relationship with her black servant Moses, and how these emotions reflect a broader fear of threats to colonial society (Grogan, 2011). The paper argues that bodily metaphor is an important component of racist constructions and

maintains individual subjectivity through abjection, which in turn reinforces group identity. Ultimately, Lessing's use of bodily metaphor in the novel is presented as a powerful critique of colonial ideology and its defensive paranoia.

**Results and Discussion**

In this essay, the primary focus is on Lessing's novel, *The Grass is Singing*, which is set in Southern Rhodesia in the mid-twentieth century. The author aims to criticize the oppressive white society and its impact on women. The novel portrays how colonialism destroys individuals' personality, replacing rationality with insanity, learning with ignorance, and control with weakness. The main character, Mary, experiences several social and mental struggles that lead to her demise. Her powerlessness within patriarchal and colonial norms is highlighted by her worsening ill-health. The figure of Moses consenting to the position of a killer only validates the colonial narrative that says locals' murder, steal, or rape. Doris Lessing's works often explore the themes of identity formation and the impact of colonialism on individuals and societies. In her writing, she frequently employs the technique of shifting perspectives between the self and other to highlight the complexities involved in the process of identity formation. The author adopts a critical approach to analyse the novel and does not use any statistical or numerical methods but applies theories to prove the required stance.

The novel *The Grass is Singing* focuses on the issues of racial and gender discrimination, and challenges the traditional power dynamic of master-slave relationship through the perspective of a white woman. The story delves into the psychology of both the colonizer and the colonized, using the history of South Africa as a backdrop to offer a new dimension to the situation. Through this analysis, the novel reveals insights into the ideologies and identities shaped by the colonial discussion. It shows how subjectivity can shift and lose its original purity as individuals interact with each other, and emphasizes the fluidity of power dynamics between the colonized and the colonizer. In addition, the novel sheds light on the role of women in societies under colonization, where racial discrimination and gender are intertwined. The theories of Bhabha are used to analyse the novel, revealing the precarious nature of power and position for both the colonizer and the colonized.

In her novel, Lessing addresses the problems of racial struggle in white-ruled South Africa, as well as the difficult life of a deprived woman. While class division and gender discrimination were not given as much attention, Lessing depicts the society of mid-20th-century Rhodesia as deeply divided along racial lines. Through the novel, she powerfully exposes the prejudice suffered by non-whites at that time, revealing the stark differences between the lives of colonizers and colonized. The white rulers use different methods to degrade the non-white population, employing binary oppositions like male-female, oppressor-oppressed, self-other, and centre-margin, based on the criteria of colour, gender and power. To keep their place of authority in the imperial order and to justify their behaviour, they propagate untrue tales about the locals and make use of the intimate categories of race and gender.

The colonized and the colonizer are assigned specific roles in the bifurcated society through a deliberate allocation of distinct characteristics and qualities. According to Bhabha, the objective of colonial discourse is to portray the colonized as inferior and degenerate based on their racial origin in order to justify conquest and establish systems of administration and instruction. The white colonizers in South Africa treated the non-white races they colonised as inferior and required complete obedience from them. The non-whites were mistreated for their own gain by the whites, who denied them of any benefits, treated them like dogs, and branded them as sluggish black savages and foul-smelling monsters. Terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust, and anarchy dominated the colonizer's speech. Lessing

suggests that the non-whites were never regarded as human beings, worthy of companionship, but only in the context of the master-servant relationship.

To maintain the racial hierarchy between the colonizers and the colonized, the white masters spread negative stereotypes about dark-skinned people, such as that they are shifty, savage, slow, unfaithful, and vulgar. Such stereotypes, like the idea that black men are prone to theft, rape, and murder, and black women are strange, alien, and primitive creatures with ugly desires, were widespread in colonial society. The colonizers created a fully negative cultural identity by projecting onto the natives all the terrible traits and attributes that they themselves despised and feared. The colonial discourse sought to make the Indians a "knowable and visible" social reality but also simultaneously making them "other" and "wild" by disseminating these unfavourable views about them (Bhabha 70, 71) (Bhabha, 2012). Stereotypes must be repeated often until they are ingrained in both the colonisers' and the colonized's thoughts in order to stop the slippery motion of the colonial subjects. Such unfavourable stereotypes were employed by the conquerors to defend their treatment of the native population and absolve themselves of moral responsibility.

Since Mary was denied agency and freedom in the scenario, a gender viewpoint must also be taken into consideration. As she was not permitted to think for herself, she never really questioned the subject of race. The colonial schooling was simply spoon-fed to her. She learned to stay away from the nasty and dangerous locals at a young age. She was raised with a strong sense of severe aversion and fear.

She was naturally terrified of them. White South African women are raised to be exclusively. When she questioned why she couldn't go out alone as a youngster, she was informed in a hushed, matter-of-fact voice that such people were nasty and might harm her. Mary is aware of this supremacist ideology, just like all other white South African women. Her involvement in the imperial project is mandatory and predestined; it is not voluntary. These colonial stereotypes are also present in her views, attitudes, behaviour, and values. She overlooked the human component of the race and delighted in feeling superior to the people of colour. She had very conflicted thoughts regarding racial prejudice before she married Dick Turner. To Mary, race meant "the office boy in the firm where she worked, other women's servants, and the amorphous mass of natives in the streets whom she hardly noticed" (Lessing 42) (Lessing, 2000). She always thought about the lives they had in reality like. "She had never come into contact with natives before, as an employer on her own account" (Lessing 70) (Lessing, 2000). However, almost immediately after taking control of the administration, Mary's inclination to mistreat the local workers resurfaced. She continued to treat her servants unkindly, rigidly, uncompromisingly, and rudely. She got into arguments with them and deducted tranche of their pays for common errors they made. She flew into a "frenzy of annoyance" with their "shifty and dishonest nature" (Lessing 94) (Lessing, 2000). She drained all of her frustrations on her servants. She hated the local people, even the little pot-bellied, unclothed kids.

Although Mary acknowledges the racism, she does not easily accept the traditional gender standards. When she does conform to them, she does so with a sense of sorrow. Mary struggles with the desire to be a free and dynamic individual, while also feeling obligated to conform to the traditional gender role of a humble and altruistic subject. She rejects the normative expectations placed upon her by living alone on her income, enjoying a lively and free life, and choosing not to marry or engage in sexual relationships with men due to her traumatic upbringing. Mary's negative perception of femininity stems from her parents' troubled marriage and lack of emotional connection. Her mother, a passive and plaintive figure, and her father, a drunkard living in poverty but empowered by authority and agency, serve as her initial models of gender roles. After accidentally witnessing her parents'

lovemaking, Mary associates the sexual act with feelings of terror and embarrassment and suppresses her sexuality as a defence mechanism. Jean Pickering highlights the primary concerns of race, gender, and class prevalent in the Southern region (Pickering, 1990).

Initially, Mary successfully defies the societal norms that dictate her gender role. At 16 years old, she finds a job as a secretary, which allows her to be independent and live her life on her own terms. After her mother's death, Mary severs ties with her father and seeks revenge for her mother's suffering. Even after the death of her parents she felt relieved as there will be fewer mouths to feed. However, Mary's ideas about men, marriage, family, and sexuality are shaped by her traumatic childhood experiences, and she carries these ideas with her for the rest of her life. Although she does not care for men and has a profound distaste for sex, she cannot remove herself from the influence of men, and her life is entirely dependent on them. Even her male friends do not see her as a sexual being, reinforcing the male-dominated societal norm. Mary is laden with the impalpable but steel-strong pressure to be married, which is the sole explanation of a woman's life. In an effort to contradict herself, Mary marries Dick Turner, who marries her to escape his loneliness and to fulfil the societal expectation of setting up a family. However, this marriage does not bring happiness to either of them. Mary's marriage is not based on her own nature rather it is based on shared expectations, and she finds it impossible to fit together what she wants for herself and what society expects of her. This marriage between two very different people who are not in love and do not understand each other only contributes to the subjects' ambivalence and despair in the context of male-female gender roles.

The colonialism-related prejudices serve as evidence that the status of the colonised is dynamic rather than fixed. Bhabha contends that the status of the coloniser is similarly not set in stone and is instead flexible and changeable. Bhabha challenges the notion of a fixed identity and contends that interactions between colonisers and colonised can alter the cultural meanings and positions of both groups. The process of negotiating cultural meanings can constantly reform the subjectivities and positionalities of both groups. However, the colonial doctrine creates a power dynamic that determines the roles of the colonizer and colonized, causing individuals to lose their sense of individuality in favour of racial identity. Individuals cannot fully assume the colonizer's role or reject it entirely, and in trying to fit into the system, they are forced to alter themselves in some way.

Dick Turner exudes an excessive amount of ambivalence. Dick Turner is probably the only character in the book who sees the dark labourer as humans, despite the fact that he treats them violently. He is neither horribly unfriendly nor seriously intrigued by his relationship with the local employees. He and his black employees appear to have an exceptional level of empathy for one another. He interacts with his native workers for the majority of the day and is not too critical to laugh along with them when they tell a joke. Sometimes Dick treats them so humanely that Mary gets annoyed and confused because it interferes with the stereotype she was raised with. “She was filled with wonder, and even repulsion. Dick was really sorry to see the end of this nigger! She could not understand any white person feeling anything personal about a native; it made Dick seem really horrible to her” (Lessing 68).

Despite the constant undercurrent of anger and hatred, he would joke with them to keep them in a good mood. With his knowledge of prevailing morality and his willingness to defy these societal norms, Dick encounters a mental and psychological divide. He feels furious, disappointed, tired, and hopeless as a result of this internal battle. He fails to uphold the desired representation of a white male authority figure and loses his standing within the colonial system. As a result, he becomes uncertain of his position and falls into what Homi Bhabha calls the third space of enunciation (Bhabha, 2012).

He inadvertently inherits numerous characteristics and traits of the blacks by consistently working side by side with the locals. He appears to be turning into a more native person every day. He begins to smoke local cigarettes, moves into a residence that is reminiscent of a few locals, establishes a kaffir shop to facilitate his money-making scheme, etc. He would even occasionally snore loudly while lying in his sickbed and blow his nose into his fingers into a bush. To lift the spirits of the villagers, he makes jokes and laugh with them. By allowing himself to indulge in the characteristics of the other, he appears to have transcended colonial norms. He appeared to be standing next to them and to be one of them, according to Mary, and even his colour did not seem all that different—he was burnt a rich brown—and the way he was standing did not seem to alter much. In doing so, he opposes the self-other or master-servant relationship paradigm that was prevalent throughout colonial times. Dick eventually loses control of himself and his surroundings while in this uneasy posture, which drives him towards a grim lunacy.

Mary appears to have a clear understanding of her racial superiority and the inferiority of the native people, in contrast to Tony and Dick. Her unwavering belief in the colonial system can be attributed to her role as a steadfast agent of colonial enterprise. As a woman, Mary was confined to a position outside of the dominant discourse, and therefore unable to form her own theories on racism. She was simply born into the system and lacked agency to challenge it. According to Simi Aghazadeh's analysis of the novel, Mary's position as an Other in a male-dominated society is similar to the experience of black individuals in a white-dominated society. However, due to the limitations of her culture and upbringing, she is unable to recognize or understand her own Otherness and form a true sense of self.

Mary's excessive rage and frightened aggressiveness can not be completely attributed to her prolonged colonial schooling because they were also a product of her lifelong despair, loneliness, and frustration. Her development into a vile, unfair, and merciless mistress was influenced by a number of things, including her miserable marriage to Dick, their rundown home, the oppressive heat, absence of exercise, her unwillingness to take charge of her life, and her anger with Dick's subpar agricultural skills. Her misery was caused by gender rolle she was expected to play, which compelled her to take on the worst aspects of the coloniser position. Being trapped in the roles of a woman and a coloniser drove Mary to abandon her ambitions and sense of self. She was forced to give up her desires and identity. She felt superior because of her superior race, yet she was the gendered Other because of her inferior gender identification, a status that was established by male-dominated South African society.

Bhabha argues that ambivalence, or the presence of conflicting attitudes, creates its own downfall. It disrupts the authority of colonialism and undermines the idea of the colonizer's superiority by exposing the sameness of the colonizer and the colonized. As a result, the identities that were built on the basis of difference became fractured, leaving a hole in the colonial site, following gaps, also known as third spaces, serve as transitional points between the destruction of one identity and the construction of a new or modified one. These spaces offer opportunities for developing new strategies for selfhood, whether it is individual or collective, which initiates new forms of identity (Bhabha, 2012).

Mary's encounter with Moses has thrown her into a state of ambivalence, which places her in a liminal or third space between her previous identity as a master and her new recognition of the humanistic aspects of the inhabitants. Moses' intervention challenges her notion of superiority and invalidates it. Mary is torn between her old beliefs that natives are dirty savages and her new-found understanding of them as individuals worthy of companionship. This internal conflict creates an ongoing restlessness, passivity, and anxiety in Mary. She has lost her sense of self and time, and her mind wanders aimlessly.

Similar to Bhabha's notion that the roles of the colonizer and colonized are not fixed, Mary and Moses' roles also shift during their relationship. Initially, Mary believed in her superiority and struck Moses with a sjambok, but Moses eventually takes over and controls her. Mary surrenders herself to Moses and finds the stronger man she always desired, and even though she recognizes a new relationship between them, Moses consumes her completely. In a moment of weakness, Mary gives up control to Moses, who refuses to return it even when Mary regains her senses.

Moses plays a role in Mary's downfall as he challenges her ingrained racial and gender values, forcing her to acknowledge him and submit to him. Although Mary is racially superior, she is sexually and psychologically inferior to Moses. Moses represents Mary's unsatisfied desires, and she expresses her emotions through her ambiguous relationship with him. Mary is able to acknowledge her true self and sexuality through her sexual bond with Moses, that is something that her marriage to a white man was unable to provide. However, she fails to achieve complete autonomy and individuality because she does not resist male authority. Mary relies on Moses for her happiness and begins to retreat from the world, feeling like she is in a dark tunnel with an inevitable final destination. Despite not fully regaining her rationality and subjectivity, Mary does break free from patriarchal and colonial ideology in various ways, leading her to live in a world where other people's standards do not hold weight. She no longer remembers what her family is like. According to Aghazadeh, the natural dynamic between a dominating male and a subordinate woman in a patriarchal society is complicated simply because the lady is white and man is black (Aghazadeh, 2011). This upsets spirit de corps and blurs the distinction between "us" and "them", creating friction in colonial society (116) (Aghazadeh, 2011).

Mary violates two taboos by engaging in an extramarital relationship with a man outside the white communal order, breaking both colonial and sexual norms. As gender and race are integral components of the hierarchical structure used by white settlers to assert their dominance and security in an alien land, Mary unintentionally challenges this order, disrupting the established power dynamic. In light of the fact that she unintentionally blurs the line between herself and others and exposes the repressive nature of colonial control, which victimises both the coloniser and the colonised, Katherine Fishburn refers to her as a "accidental rebel" (4) (Fishburn, 1994).

By examining this novel closely, it becomes apparent that the predetermined oppositions found in post-colonial discourse are often inadequate when it comes to explaining individual post-colonial subjects. We can only begin to comprehend the subjectivity and positionality these persons by dismantling these forced identities, such as oppressor-oppressed, self-other, colonizer-colonized, and master-servant. These divisions, according to Bhabha, are not rigid but rather fluid, continually interacting and clashing with one another. Subjectivity is constantly being destroyed and rebuilt; it is never static or complete in the in-between or Third Space of culture. No sovereign subject is completely free from outside influence or internal inconsistencies. Both the colonized and the colonizer turn into mirror images of one another under the harmful but inevitable effects of colonialism. The trajectory of colonial subjects seeking self-completeness is heavily influenced by their access to power, which has the potential to upset power dynamics. Lessing tackles the topic of pre- and post-apartheid racial conflict in *The Grass is Singing* and challenges assumed concepts of identity, self-other binaries, and static models of power relations.

**Conclusion**

The novel delves into the experiences of a white woman in a male-dominated post-colonial society. It brings to light the predicament of white women who, while belonging to the ruling class, are marginalized and excluded from positions of power. They are forced to adhere to the established values and beliefs of their race, while being used only as enforcers of white supremacy. Mary is compelled to give up her own desires, agency, and freedom in an effort to gain acceptance from the system. Her gender renders her powerless and she is unable to achieve self-actualization and recognition. Despite being expected to conform, she challenges the racist and patriarchal hegemony that is forced upon her. However, she is ultimately too weak to fight against a system built on exploitation and tyranny. Her defiance is met with punishment, rejection, torture, degradation, loneliness, rape, and even murder. Nevertheless, her resistance undermines the binary structure of self and other and anticipates a change in the oppressive system.

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